

Engaging the already engaged, or letting people into politics? Experts respond to Ed Miliband's proposal for a 'Public PMQs'

By The Author

Ed Miliband recently announced his desire for a new kind of Prime Ministers Questions, in which members of the public were invited to put the PM under scrutiny. Democratic Audit asked experts to respond to the proposal, with a seeming consensus that the idea isn't necessarily a bad one, but doesn't particularly amount to much of a change.

Dr Louise Thompson, Lecturer in Politics, University of Surrey

When Ed Miliband put forward the idea of a public question time at the weekend he said that he wanted to 'let the public into our politics'. Given the increasing disengagement with traditional forms of politics, this objective is commendable. But a public question time is unlikely to achieve this. The "Cameron Direct" events and Nick Clegg's radio phone-in show already provide outlets for members of the public to ask questions to the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister on a regular basis. Until we are privy to more detail it is difficult to see how this new proposal would add any value other than the formality of a parliamentary environment.



If Ed Miliband wants to increase citizens' engagement with politics there are better places to target resources and to ensure the participation of a much greater number of people than simply selecting a small group to attend a public question time. Increasing the use of existing digital initiatives in Parliament such as the Education Select Committee's #AskGove sessions would provide a more effective means of channeling public scrutiny in which anyone can participate in executive scrutiny whilst at the same time ensuring that MPs ask the questions that the public themselves have put forward.

Steven Fielding, Professor of Political History, University of Nottingham

A few years ago I was at a meeting addressed by the former Speaker of the Commons Michael Martin in which listed all the things that Parliament had done to increase its engagement with a skeptical public. The list was short but he was especially proud that there had been improvements to the Visitors' Centre.



Ed Miliband's proposed 'public question time' indicates that like the maligned Martin he is also aware that there's a problem but it also shows the two men share the same unwillingness to do much about it.

Prime Minister's Questions as it exists is, of course, a camped-up parody of democracy in action, one to which all the party leaders contribute. But Miliband's supplemental session is no solution to that problem, nor the wider one of public disengagement from Westminster.

There are lots of practical questions. How will the members of the public be selected? Who will decide who asks which questions? How long will the Prime Minister have to respond – and will

s/he be forced to answer questions put or get away with a glib responses?

But this is to take the proposal seriously. For someone who just two days before had disavowed slick PR, Ed Miliband's proposal reeks of it. People's disengagement from representative politics will not be overcome by such mediated events – how far did the 2010 leaders' television debates improve that, despite the hopes of some? – but by work, on the ground and face-to-face.

Martin Price, Project Manager for MYPLACE

Based on findings from [MYPLACE](#), and on current work around young people's interactions with formal politics, while a public opportunity to question the Prime Minister is not going to harm our democracy, it is unlikely to bridge the "gulf a mile wide" between the general public and Westminster. In its current form, the televised Prime Minister's Questions does nothing to improve a jaded public view of Westminster. This has been a recurring theme in our conversations with young people, and was eloquently described by a participant at a recent workshop as being "like a posh Jeremy Kyle Show". Mr Miliband may find that until that perception of the House of Commons changes, it is not a party that the public is keen to be invited to.



Mr Miliband spoke on the Andrew Marr show about "changing our political culture." It seems naive to imagine that this change will begin in the performative politics of Westminster. Mr Miliband's proposal naturally relies on people to come forward with questions, but the young people we speak to often tell us that if they are not socialised into politics by their families they simply don't feel that they "know enough about politics" to make an educated choice at the ballot box. It is therefore implausible that people in that position are going to come forward to ask a public question to the Prime Minister.

As well as a lack of education, another theme to emerge from our research is that many young people view politics (and politicians) as an arena for a privileged elite. With this in mind, I found it interesting to hear Mr Miliband outline his plan to "let the public in to our politics", a phrase that encapsulates the problem quite neatly. Politics needs to belong to the public, and both the public and the politicians must believe that. This is the change that is needed in our political culture. Without such a change, any public session in Parliament is only likely to engage the already engaged.

[Click here to see Part 2 of our 'Ask the Experts' piece on Ed Miliband's proposal for a "Public PMQs"](#)

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